

Poverty, inequality and official indifference are to blame for the dozens killed by the Christmas weekend blizzard in Buffalo

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The number of reported deaths from the massive storm that hit Buffalo, New York and most of the country continues to grow as recovery efforts continue. As of Thursday, Erie County officials reported 39 confirmed deaths, most of them, 31, within the city of Buffalo.

That number is certain to go up as people check on family members and friends and emergency crews and National Guard troops continue following up on emergency calls that had been placed. According to the *Buffalo News*, Erie County Executive Mark Polocarnz reported Thursday that a number of recovered bodies, including that of a four-month-old baby, still await an autopsy to confirm that death was the result of the weather.

There is a backlog of over 1,100 emergency 911 calls and welfare checks that went unanswered during the storm. Social media are full of pleas for assistance, as people run out of food and other necessities.

Power has been restored for most, but many people were without power for four or five days as temperatures remained below freezing. Temperatures dropped below zero Fahrenheit on Friday, December 23 and remained in single digits last weekend. The massive blizzard dropped up to 52 inches of snow on the area over three days, and brought with it hurricane force winds as high as 79 miles per hour.

Throughout the country, another 25 deaths are blamed on the cold front and winter storms that stretched from the Rocky Mountains to Maine and as far south as parts of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia.

Many of those who died were caught outside in their cars or walking when the blizzard hit. Others died in

their homes without heat over the Christmas weekend, as temperatures fell to 22 degrees.

Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown defended his handling of the storm in an interview Thursday with the *Washington Post*. “This was a historic storm,” he said. “This should not have come as a surprise. I absolutely think residents were adequately prepared.”

“Everything that could have been done in the lead-up to the storm, and during the storm, was done,” he added.

Joycelyn Benton, an advanced EMT at American Medical Response of Western New York, which is contracted by Buffalo to provide ambulance services, told CNN that she felt officials could have put out snow plows earlier.

At least three people died from medical emergencies under conditions where EMS crews were not able to reach them.

“Not being able to help people is horrible,” she told CNN. “Knowing we could be a block away from a call but we couldn’t get to it because of the weather was difficult.”

Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz did not issue a travel ban until 9:30 a.m. Friday, less than 30 minutes before whiteout conditions made driving impossible. County officials’ claims the ban was not issued sooner so that third shift employees could get home from work is disproven by the fact that stores and other work locations were allowed to remain open on Friday.

Workers who had gone to work were trapped at their job or as they attempted to drive home. Workers and shoppers at Walmart and other stores were trapped. Many were forced to spend several nights inside.

Residents now face the possibility of flooding, as

temperatures climb into the fifties, with rain predicted for Saturday, December 31. Again, government officials are indifferent, with Poloncarz stating that any problems will be “minimal.”

Mayor Brown, New York Governor Kathy Hochul and President Joe Biden, all Democrats, have sent their prayers to the families of those who died. The news media are dutifully referring to the disaster as the “storm of the century,” as if it was impossible to predict or prepare for.

In reality, the response to the storm is another example of social murder under capitalism. Almost all those who died and the tens of thousands without power were working class and poor. When a full accounting of those who died is made, it will undoubtedly show that most of the victims were not able to work from home and could not afford to take a day off, or were among the homeless.

Poloncarz did not issue a travel ban until the storm had already begun. Businesses were not ordered to close on December 23 and send their employees home before the storm arrived.

There has yet to be an accounting of why plowing was not started sooner. Buffalo has only 24 truck drivers in its Public Works division responsible for clearing the streets, and Mayor Brown has not said when they began plowing. It is very possible that not wanting to pay overtime, the city relied on it being a holiday weekend and hoped that the weather would warm sooner and the snow would melt.

CNN has reported that Brown did not attend daily calls with county and other area leaders to coordinate the response to the blizzard. Meanwhile, state officials who knew the storm was coming for five days did not provide additional resources until Monday and Tuesday.

Buffalo’s housing stock is very old and often lacks windows and insulation of sufficient quality to protect against freezing temperatures.

On any given night, 2,500 to 4,000 people are homeless, and in all 7,500 people are homeless throughout the year. The city does not operate a single homeless shelter. Those that are open are run by religious and charitable organizations and do not have enough space to house the entire homeless population.

On Sunday, December 25, only one warming center was open 24 hours, and another two were open 12

hours. With the roads impassable and a blizzard raging, it was impossible for those in need to reach them.

Furthermore, the Biden administration and the Democrats in Congress have driven up the homeless population by lifting the moratorium on evictions that had been put in place at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Poverty in Buffalo and throughout the upstate region, including Rochester, Syracuse and Utica, is among the worst in the country.

In 2021, in the four upstate cities, nearly one in three people lived below the horrendously low official poverty line of just \$21,960 for a family of three. The median household income is roughly \$40,000 a year, just over half of New York state’s average of \$75,000.

Childhood poverty rates are even higher, running between 45 and 50 percent of all children under 17 growing up in families living in poverty.

Again, the Biden administration and the Democrats in Congress made this problem worse when they eliminated the extended child tax credit at the end of 2021, claiming that it was no longer needed because the pandemic was over.

The deaths and overall catastrophe created by the winter storm are not merely a natural occurrence. Social inequality and the inability to address even the most basic needs of modern life are direct results of the capitalist system.

Billions are spent on wars, propping up the banking system and stock markets for the rich, but the basic needs of the working class, the poor and the elderly go unanswered. Only when the working class takes control of production and society is run democratically to meet the needs of all and not the profits of a tiny few can the great social problems be addressed.



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